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Question: Did Nikita Khrushchev's Interest in Religion Cause His Fall?

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WASHINGTON, June 30 —This intriguing footnote to history should be entitled "three-told tales," or "how the story grew." The pastor of a large West Coast Methodist church recently told a ministerial group in Philadelphia that West Germany's famed Lutheran pastor, Martin Niemöller, flew to Russia last August at the invitation of Nikita Khrushchev to give the then Communist boss "instruction in Christianity."

He said Niemöller disclosed the mission while attending the World Council of Churches meeting in Copenhagen, and said he was going directly to Khrushchev's vacation retreat at the Black Sea.

Intrigued, I telephoned the pastor in California to check on his report. He verified that he had been quoted correctly, and said the source of his information was a distinguished educator and former assistant secretary of labor, who had been in Denmark last August.

HE GAVE ME the name of a prominent bible lecturer in Virginia who could tell me the present whereabouts of the educator. I called the estimable lady, who not only told me where to reach the educator, but said she "knew of the marvelous conversion of Mr. Khrushchev to Christianity."

I asked why, if this were the case, Niemöller's "conversion" of Khrushchev had received no publicity, and she replied: "Because we don't want to gloat over it. It would do more harm than good to have the Russians know about it at this time."

I next called the former government official-educator, and he said: "Niemöller personally told me last August that he was leaving Copenhagen directly for Russia and the Black Sea."

"He said Khrushchev had invited him to come and give him some instruction 'about' Christianity. He said nothing about a possible conversion."

"HOWEVER, the following month I sat next to Archbishop Alexi of the Russian Orthodox church, at a ceremony in London's Westminster Abbey. The archbishop was there too, and his niece told me:

"If my uncle lives, within a short time there will be a very important announcement out of Russia concerning the church, which will make it possible for me to return to Russia for the first time in twenty years."

The timing of all this seemed significant. Archbishop Alexi returned home to Russia in September. But shortly afterwards Khrushchev was deposed by the Russian presidium. Was it possible that his downfall had been hastened because the godless Red leaders had learned of his interest in Christianity?

THEN BEGAN the long question to learn whether Niemöller had in fact visited Khrushchev last August. Our CIA refused to confirm or deny. The State Department, after several hours, said no one there knew whether the German Lutheran had been in Russia.

Top U. S. Lutheran leaders who had attended the world council meeting were now travelling in Africa. The German Embassy

here did not know Niemöller's past schedule, but sent a cable of inquiry to Bonn.

THREE DAYS later an answering cable arrived. It reported that Niemöller, an honorary president of the World Council of Churches, did fly from Denmark to Moscow last August. He then "vacationed at Odessa on the Black Sea, but did not see Khrushchev," the West German foreign office declared.

That would seem to end it, but not entirely to dispel the mystery. Did Khrushchev actually invite Niemöller to come and give him "instructions about Christianity?" If so, was he truly interested in learning more about religion, or had he hoped to use the friendly-to-Russia Lutheran minister as a propaganda pawn in the tug-of-war between West and East Germany? And if no meeting occurred, did something influence Khrushchev to have second thoughts about entertaining a Christian pastor?

Perhaps Niemöller can take it from there.